

TOYNBEE'S JUDGMENT OF THE JEWS

Where the Historian Misread History

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UNDER title of "The Modern West and the Jews," A. J. Toynbee devotes a subsection of Volume VIII of the last four books of his *Study of History* to the fate of Jewry under the Nazis and to subsequent developments in Israel. His remarks therein about Zionism and Israel have, quite rightly, outraged Jews and other people. Mr. Toynbee equates the monstrous crimes perpetrated upon the Jews of Europe by the Germans with what the Israelis did to the Arabs of Palestine, and seems to find the Israelis as much at fault as the Nazis were! One might attribute this slanderous indictment of Zionism to Mr. Toynbee's weakness for symmetry and parallels, for likenesses and correspondences in general. But from the tenor of his other remarks

THE last installment of A. J. Toynbee's *Study of History* contains a judgment upon Zionism, and the Jews, that has outraged many non-Zionists as well as Zionists. FRANZ BORKENAU, who here deals with Professor Toynbee's views, is better known to the readers of *COMMENTARY* as a political observer than historian, but he has published many historical studies in journals abroad, and his first love was and remains history—world history in particular. Born in Vienna, he was active in left-wing German politics during the 20's, and emigrated to England with Hitler's advent. After the war he returned to Germany to serve for a time as professor of history at the University of Marburg. He now lives in Switzerland and enjoys a worldwide reputation as a decipherer of events within the inner circles of Soviet power, having not only forecast Stalin's death but also predicted the showdown between Khrushchev and Malenkov weeks before it came. Mr. Borkenau is the author of several books, among them *The Spanish Cockpit*, *World Communism*, and, most recently, *European Communism*. His last contribution to this magazine was "The Peking-Moscow Axis and the Western Alliance" in December 1954.

about the Jews and things Jewish, it seems plausible to conclude that something more fundamental is at work than a historical or literary device. Toynbee is swayed by certain misconceptions as to the nature and history of Jewry as a people and as a spiritual tradition. These misconceptions have the force of an animus—one symptom of which is the surprisingly small part he assigns to Judaism in the origins of Christianity, and his tendency to overstress the originality of the latter's universal and redemptive aspects to the neglect of everything Prophetic in the Old Testament.

But Toynbee is a professional historian and only an amateur theologian. It is his historical assumptions, definitions, and verdicts that require examination first and demand to be taken most seriously.

MR. TOYNBEE does not regard the history of the Jews as *altogether* unique, and in this he is, of course, right. The transformation of a tribal kingdom into a non-territorial, *millet* community whose religious and national identity coincided, was a frequent phenomenon in the Middle East after the fall of the Assyrian empire in the 7th century B.C.E. From then till the disintegration of the Ottoman Turkish empire, the Middle East was largely made up of such *millets* (the term itself is of Ottoman origin): that is, groups separated by religion rather than language, living side by side in the same countryside and same towns. In this situation the religious community filled many of the social and political functions—though by no means all—that the linguistically unified nation does in modern Europe. The Armenians and Parsees, like the Jews, are classical examples of such "religion-nations," and to them could be added the

Copts as well as the many other *millet* groups Toynbee mentions as existing at large in the Arab world, and particularly in Lebanon and Syria.

Toynbee defined the *millet*, and described the Jews as constituting one, in the first volume of his *Study of History*. What he saw as the basic sociological reason for the "Jewish tragedy" in Europe was the collision between the *millet* type of community and the territorially, linguistically, and politically unified national structures into which Western civilization is organized. The conflict was inevitable because the two types of structure were incompatible. In this reviewer's opinion, Toynbee is again right. Where he goes astray, however, is in assuming, implicitly and without evidence, that the Jews must remain a *millet* in order to survive as Jews. This error vitiates almost everything else he has to say about the Diaspora. Yet he seems to be aware that the history of Jewry since the 18th century is that of an abandonment of the *millet*—or ghetto—and an increasing integration in modern Western civilization, and that this has been done without appreciable loss of ethnic identity. The contradiction stems from the fact that, though the Jews have refused to fit themselves into Toynbee's scheme, he insists on retaining it nevertheless. This, as well as his bias against Judaism as such, may help explain the acrimony of his remarks about them.

In Toynbee's scheme, modern life is faced with a choice between "archaism" (or ossification) and "futurism" (or nihilism). How could the Jews, an archaic community to begin with, and remaining one until very recently, have so resolutely chosen the alternative of "futurism"—that is, to establish a Jewish territorial state in Palestine and at the same time to modernize themselves in the Diaspora? Not only should they, in Toynbee's view, have remained a *millet*, if only in order to stay devout and ward off modern "secularism," but also because he holds that the *millet* will be more viable than the nation-state as a basic institution in the next, "religious" phase of world history.

THE first thing to ask in following the train of thought that has led Toynbee into error about the contemporary Jews is whether the *millet* they formed in the past can be defined in the same terms as the communities formed by the modern Assyrians, the Copts, the Armenians, and the other *millets* that, unlike the Jews, have remained largely tied to the Middle East. The answer touches on the very essence of the Jews as a people.

As I have said, *millets* are nations that are defined by religion, not by territory, political forms, or language. Hence the content of its religion plays the chief role in determining the history of a *millet* people. Toynbee, for all his professed solicitude for religion, overlooks this factor of content and judges from form alone: accordingly, the history of the Jews in the Diaspora should be more or less like that of the Armenians and Copts in their Diasporas. But it is not. The reason, though it may be concealed from Toynbee, is not hard to find. Like the Jews, the Armenians, Assyrians, Copts, *et al.*, all have had pre-*millet* pasts as territorially and politically unified nations. Unlike the Jews, however, none of these other *millet* peoples is connected by religion with its pre-*millet* past, and none acquired its status as a *millet* in quite the same way. Neo-Babylonian, Hellenistic, Roman, and Moslem conquerors imposed that status on these peoples by force of arms, and in most cases before they had adopted their present religion or even a precursor of it. As they were deprived of political independence by an outside "universal state," so they were converted to the Christianity to which they all adhere as *millets* by what was, more often than not, an outside "universal church."

With the Jews it was quite otherwise, the relation between their *millet* and pre-*millet* phases being directly inverted. Israel's religious transformation, culminating in Judaism, was already implicit in Mosaic law, and proceeded rapidly after the beginning of the Prophetic age, which came before there was any serious foreign threat to either Israel's or Judah's political integrity. The

Prophets emphasized righteousness and devotion to the sole and unique Jehovah at the expense, if necessary, of state power. When Israel and then Judah collapsed under foreign invasion, the latter at least was so penetrated by Prophetic teaching, and the teaching itself so advanced, that Judah was able to preserve her national identity despite the loss of both homeland and political independence. Thus, with the First Exile, Jewry became the first people able to safeguard its identity solely by means of religion and ritual: hence the prototype of all the other *millet* peoples. It was because they more or less created, and *chose*, their conception of themselves as a religious community that the Jews remained a peculiar people, even after one section of them returned to their homeland under Persian rule and re-assumed a more conventional outward aspect as a nation. And it was by triumphantly reviving the *millet* conception later on, after the fall of the Second Temple and their final dispersion, that, to the amazement of the Gentiles, the Jewish nation survived an even more catastrophic political defeat than the Babylonian conquest.

But the point here is not so much the success of the *millet* form as a means of national survival as the fact that the Jews were the only people to *choose* the *millet* as their own creation, rather than have it imposed upon them by others. They were able to do this because their own, native religion, with its "premature" belief in a single almighty God, had under the duress of exile sloughed off almost every trace of tribalism and almost every attachment to a political end, and shifted its center of gravity to the spiritual plane. All the other *millet* peoples, with the sole exception of the Parsees, have no memory, cultural or religious, of their pre-*millet* histories. The Jews, on the other hand, emerging from a disintegrating *millet* world today, still retain a continuity with their pre-*millet* past. That past holds something tremendous—the revelation of a faith and an outlook which mothered the two universal faiths of Christianity and Islam. This Jewish past is not a contrived or reconstructed his-

torical memory, as the "primordial" Teutonic past of Wotan and Valhalla was for the crackpot ideologues of Nazi Germany, but was always, and remains, a living, active, natural force.

ONE's past largely determines one's future. The living past of a *millet* people who remember nothing before their *millet* is likely to bring in the future either the continuation of their *millet* existence or their disintegration as a group. The Jews, despite Mr. Toynbee, are not faced with these exclusive alternatives because their memories leap back over two thousand years of ghetto life to the Prophets and the Exodus. The Jewish identity has not quickly disintegrated under the impact of modern life as the ethnic identities of other *millets* have. Religious or irreligious, the Jews have maintained their character and continuity as Jews almost everywhere.

Einstein, opposing the anti-rationalism inherent in the empirical outlook of a Planck or a Heisenberg, insists upon the need, the possibility, and the obligation to render the universe intelligible in terms of a single rational principle—just as the Deutero-Isaiah insisted on the intelligible unity of God's governance of the world. If the Jewish contribution to every activity, good and bad, in behalf of social justice and liberalism is so disproportionately large, it is not simply because Jews themselves hope to gain by this, but also because Isaiah and Micah are still part of the Jewish consciousness. And the latter-day return to Zion evokes, and invokes, the memory of a similar return after the First Exodus.

Obviously, the pre-ghetto past of Jewry is not the "ghost" Toynbee says it is. Nor is the Jewish invocation of such a remote past "archaistic": it is at one and the same time a reaching back and a reaching forward in which the past reinforces the advance into the future. Little in modern Jewish existence reminds one of the arduous, half-frustrated efforts by which the Arabs and the Persians—let alone the smaller *millet* peoples—now try to modernize themselves. Jews play a

leading role, as a type as well as individuals, in many fields of modern life, and are able to contribute their share without undue effort in those where they do not lead. Jews themselves often ascribe this to their superior intelligence, but they are wrong. While ghetto existence did put a premium on intellectual at the expense of physical and certain practical capacities, religious tradition had a much greater and stronger hand in shaping Jewish character in the long run, and the Prophetic impulse spurs Jews to eminence much more than their supposed intellectual superiority does. Without that impulse, Jewish intellectuality (which is more a matter of training than of innate endowment) might find no better task for itself than money-making.

TOYNBEE attacks Jewish secularism in its assimilationist as well as Zionist form. Theodor Mommsen, the German historian whose account of the fall of the Second Temple certainly reveals that he was aware of Jewish failings, showed a profounder understanding of the characteristic Jewish relation to past and future. The Jew, he said, is as ready to adapt his outward conduct to whatever milieu he finds himself in, as he is unwilling to surrender one parcel of his inmost being to it. The Jewish character can be described as a synthesis of well-nigh complete stability with well-nigh complete variability. This makes Jewish participation in non-Jewish culture something unique and special—and since the demise of their original pre-Hellenistic civilization, the Jews have always had to live with, or participate in, one non-Jewish culture or another. If the Jewish combination of outer assimilation with inner aloofness or detachment has proved disturbing to Gentiles, for the same reason it has been most fertile and creative, whether for the Jews themselves or for the "host" culture.

The Nazis, alas, paid the Jews the inadvertent compliment of resenting their inner aloofness and the contributions it enabled them to make: it was the one grain of reality at the center of the horrible myths

they wove out of their hatred for the Jews, which was also an inverted fascination with an unreachable essence. Whereas Toynbee's objurgations of Zionism and his animus against Judaism in general relate to some of the most superficial aspects of contemporary Jewish life, the Nazis distorted and diabolized an aspect infinitely more profound, namely, the stiff-necked Jewish insistence on remaining Jewish under all circumstances.

TOYNBEE makes too easy an identification between modern Western secularism and the contemporary Jewish variety. The two may have converged until recently (with the happy result of releasing the Jews from the ghetto) but now they seem to be diverging. Gentile secularism appears to be heading towards a pure empiricism and relativism, whereas the Jewish kind still clings to the notion of human existence as something rationally and metaphysically intelligible and purposeful. Witness the extent to which Jewish secularism produces people *religiously* and disinterestedly dedicated to universal causes. Secularized Puritanism, which used to produce similar fruits, no longer does so to the same extent as secularized Judaism because it lacks the same inherent continuity with Prophetic tradition.

If the modern world, both Western and Communist, continues to adhere, as seems likely, to its present course of ruthless practical "realism," with its growing contempt for reason and humanism, then it may well fall to the Jews (amid the laughter of an incredulous world) to play a major part in the preservation of our cultural heritage. It may be they who will do most to enable high culture to survive until the advent of more propitious times—as the Greek and Latin Church Fathers performed a similar function during the last stages of the decay of classical civilization.

SECULARISM passes easily over into nationalism, however, and it is for its nationalism, as incorporated in Zionism, that Toynbee inveighs most bitterly against mod-

ern Jewry. Since the present writer is neither a Jewish nationalist nor a religious Jew—though very much a Jew according to the Nuremberg laws—he will not, he hopes, be accused of partisanship in his refutation of Toynbee's slanders. For slanders they are.

In Toynbee's view, the Israeli has become an entirely "new man" because he has divested himself of his Jewish past; and it is the Israeli in general, not this or that individual Israeli with fascist leanings, that Toynbee describes as "half American farmer-technician, half Nazi sicarius." This is an elegant way of calling the Israelis "half Nazi gangsters," since *sicarius*, as Horace and Cicero used the word, means "assassin." This is no slip of the pen; on one page Toynbee states that "on the Day of Judgment the gravest crime standing against the German National Socialists' account might be, not that they exterminated a majority of the Western Jews, but that they had caused the surviving remnant of Jewry to stumble. . . ." In other words, the *worst* thing the Nazis did was to push Zionism into militant and decisive action.

TOYNBEE diagnoses Israeli behavior as motivated by the "impulse to become a party to the guilt of a stronger neighbor [the Nazis!] by inflicting upon an innocent weaker neighbor the very sufferings that the original victim had experienced." He adds that the impulse behind the deeds of Palestinian Jewry since 1948 reflects what is "perhaps the most perverse of all the base propensities of Human Nature." That is: the Israelis have, in effect, treated the Arabs in the same spirit as that in which the Nazis exterminated five and a half million Jews!

He is able to draw up this calumnious indictment of Zionism only by ignoring all the really relevant factors. Zionism acquired more than a tincture of aggressive modern nationalism from its surroundings, just as traditional Judaism acquired more than a tincture of rigid ritualism from its pre-modern environment; but the fundamental fact in both cases is not the excessiveness but the incompleteness of the coloring received

from tendencies prevalent in the surrounding milieu. Anti-ritualistic as well as mystic trends ran through *millet* Jewry (which could not be said to anywhere near the same degree of the Armenians or Copts), and these foreshadowed the day when ritualism would cease to be the hallmark of Jewry.

In our time Zionism, though derived from Western nationalism and in its birthplace exposed to contamination from the resentful nationalism of Central Europe, did not aspire to manhandle others as others had manhandled Jews; Zionism was born in the first place out of the desire for refuge from the renewed anti-Semitic persecution in Russia and all the German-speaking countries in the latter part of the 19th century. The militancy of Zionism at any moment has always been proportional to the degree of anti-Semitism in the environment; it has been militant out of the plain necessities of defense, not out of its inner logic. In this way, again, Jewry, while adapting itself externally to non-Jewish forms—nationalism in this case—keeps its inner autonomy.

Jewish nationalism, unlike the French variety, did not come to fulfill democratic aspirations; such aspirations the Jews could pursue outside Zion. Nor did it spring from the Romantic movement, as German nationalism had; or from a new identification, like that of Russian nationalism, of state with religion. The midwife of Jewish nationalism was the Dreyfus Case at the end of the 19th century. It first became an effective force in answer to Jewish misfortunes during the 1914-18 war, and reached a stage of extreme militancy only after the recent world war and the Nazi murder camps, when the Jewish remnant in Palestine had to choose between independence and self-defense on the one hand, and massacre at the hands of the Arabs on the other. If Zionism continues to be militant in Israel, it is largely because the threat it had to ward off with arms in 1948 is still present.

BUT persecution was not the only parent of Zionism. There was also the dream of social justice, a direct heir of the Prophetic

tradition. Israel's socialist institutions are somewhat out of proportion to her present state of economic development, but certain socialist ideals have been realized by the Israelis as nowhere else in the world. At the same time socialism has contributed enormously to making Zionism a fundamentally pacifist movement and to mitigating what tendencies it has towards aggressive nationalism.

Another major motive of Zionism has been the desire to return the Jews to the land and to a rural way of life. This desire may not be Prophetic in origin, but there is no question but that the idealization of rural life is a strong Prophetic theme. The most immediate reason for this Zionist tendency, however, was a growing reaction against the terrible vocational specialization and narrowness imposed on the Jews by *millet* life and the ghetto. Nor could Jews have a land of their own unless they worked it themselves and spread over its countryside. Cooperative socialism and the return to the land became almost one and the same thing in Jewish Palestine. This is one of the facts that Toynbee conspicuously omits mentioning when he characterizes the youth of the *kibbutzim* as "half American farmer-technician" and "half Nazi sicarius."

The double impulse towards social justice and the rural way of life explains that feat which Toynbee—with the grudgingness that accompanies everything he has to say in favor of Jews—calls a "left-handed tour-de-force," and at which he expresses amazement: the self-transformation of ghettodwellers into efficient farmers within the space of a single generation. But in view of the Jew's average level of culture, the Jewish tradition of flexible and infinite external adaptability, and the equally Jewish and older Prophetic tradition with its power to inspire self-dedication and self-sacrifice, the Jewish return to the land becomes less surprising than might appear at first glance. What it did reveal was the true character of the modern Jew and refute the slanderously distorted one he had received in the Diaspora. If Toynbee regards this as a "tour de force"

—which has the connotation of being unnatural—it is because he accepts the distorted version of the Jewish character which holds that Jews can never make good farmers or good soldiers. Unable to account for the facts that contradict this version, he vents his puzzlement in angry denunciation of the facts.

CONCLUDING his "essay" on modern Jewry, Toynbee speculates with a good deal of relish on the possibility of conflict between the Jews remaining in the Diaspora and those who now become Israelis in Palestine. There is indeed a real problem here. To a Western urban sector given over to intellectuality and business, Jewry has now added a rural Middle Eastern one given over to practical tasks and agriculture. Though it would be vain to deny the possibilities of tension between the two sectors, it nonetheless takes Toynbee's spite, and superficiality, to overlook the astounding success with which Jewry has maintained its solidarity over the past two thousand years, though scattered among such different countries and civilizations. This capacity for unity in diversity—a capacity that belongs uniquely to the Jews—is as alive today as it ever was and, actually, the obstacles it has to cope with seem less formidable at the present moment than for a long time in the past.

Half the test has already been passed inasmuch as the *Galut* no longer objects as it used to, before Hitler, to the very project of Zionism and the *Yishuv*. Now non-Zionist as well as Zionist accepts the *Yishuv*. What remains of the test is for the *Yishuv* to pass. To urge all Jews, especially those in the West, to migrate to Israel is not only visionary; it is false. It is right and proper that Tel Aviv should concern itself with concrete, practical matters, but Jewry's spiritual concerns cannot be attended to there on the same level as in New York or London. The *Yishuv* and the *Galut* together constitute and realize the fullness of Jewish experience and potentiality. Alone, the *Galut* cannot divest itself sufficiently of the handicaps of the ghetto past; alone, the *Yishuv* cannot become full

heir and continuator of Jewish spiritual tradition. The Yishuv-plus-Galut is something entirely different from a Western nation-state: it is the fulfillment of Jewish diversity-in-identity. Without the Galut, the Yishuv would be the dwarfed parody of a Western nation-state and prey to all sorts of pathological distortions in its isolation—aberrations of the kind we have seen recently in Eastern and Central Europe. Without the Galut, the Yishuv might prove Toynbee half right.

It further characterizes Toynbee's attitude towards Israel that, while stressing the possible tensions between New York and Tel Aviv, he should neglect entirely another major aspect of Jewish diversity-in-unity. The future of Jewry as a whole probably depends to a greater extent on eventual relations between European (including American) and Oriental Jews than on those between Israeli and American Jewry. The deepest cleavage existing within Jewry is between Europeanized and Orientalized Jews. It is a problem to which Zionists gave little thought in the past. If the two groups cannot merge or work out a common type in Israel, then—and only then—the Israeli experiment will have failed on the spiritual plane.

THE chief importance of Jewish secular "assimilationism" does not lie in its effect on Jewish survival, but in the part it may play in the survival of spiritual and intellectual tradition should the world lapse into totalitarian neo-barbarism. Similarly, the success of the ethnic merger to which Israel is now challenged, though decisive for her own future, is even more decisive for the future

of mankind. Even Mr. Toynbee will agree, I feel, that relations between East and West will be the dominant concern in the next phase of world history. In this perspective, the open or concealed racism of all the countries of Anglo-Saxon culture, together with the growing impotence of the non-racist French, leaves Israel as the only place within the orbit of genuinely Western civilization where the East and West can meet inside the same national community with the possibility of physical and cultural interpenetration. Is this too much of a load to put on Israel? Does it exaggerate her importance to the rest of the world? I think not.

While Jewish history has never had a great material impact upon other peoples, its spiritual impact has been of a depth and extent that are unparalleled. Here again, the Nazis in their mixture of animal and metaphysical hatred saw truer than Toynbee does with his malicious and contrived formulations. The Nazis at least grasped the enormous importance for the world of Jewry as a *spiritual* entity—though, or precisely because, it was a spirit in whose light they saw themselves condemned. They appreciated the attractive power of Jewry and its eminent role as a conductor of spiritual currents, which was all the more reason why they wanted to destroy it. Today this role is perhaps more crucial for the rest of mankind than ever before. Should a merger of East and West inside Israel be achieved, Diaspora Jewry will feel the effects immediately, and we may be sure that through that Jewry they will be rapidly conveyed to the rest of the world.